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Chairman: Mr. Hachani ..... (Tunisia)

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98-81444 (E)

The meeting was called to order at 3.20 p.m.

Tribute to the memory of Mr. Zorig Sanjaasuren

1. **The Chairman**, on behalf of the Committee, paid tribute to the memory of Mr. Zorig Sanjaasuren, Mongolian democratic leader and human rights activist.

2. *At the invitation of the Chairman, the members of the Committee observed a moment of silence.*

Statement by the Under-Secretary-General for Economic and Social Affairs

3. **Mr. Desai** (Under-Secretary-General for Economic and Social Affairs) said that the Committee would be conducting its deliberations in the context of a world situation which was extremely uncertain. The sharp decline in growth rates had led to a huge increase in poverty and unemployment. Social services were under pressure, and capacities which had been built up with great difficulty over many years were being eroded and lost.

4. The system built up over the past 50 years was based on an implicit social compact that if national economies were to be opened up to global competition, so as to maximize the possibilities for growth, Governments would accept an obligation to protect social standards, so that there would be an accelerated reduction of poverty and unemployment and a greater capacity to meet basic needs and promote social cohesion. The current crisis could not be viewed simply as a financial crisis; it was also a social crisis which was challenging the underlying social compact. That dimension must be kept in mind when searching for solutions to the crisis; policies must be developed which could revive the prospects for development and for enhanced action on poverty eradication and social development. The answer to the crisis was not to retreat from the forces of globalization and liberalization; that approach had been tried in the past and had failed. At the same time, measures directed at maintaining or reviving confidence in capital markets were not sufficient. It was necessary to consider issues of production, distribution, employment and poverty, and in that context, the Committee's work was central to ensuring that social issues were not overlooked when addressing the problems of the current crisis in the world economy.

5. It was 50 years since the adoption of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, and while there had been a tendency, in the intervening years, to see human rights issues largely in terms of political and civil rights, the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights must also be borne in mind. In resolution 421 (V), the General Assembly had declared that the enjoyment of civic and political freedoms and of economic, social and cultural rights were interconnected and interdependent. The Declaration on the Right to Development also linked the two types of rights, and the connection had been reinforced in the Vienna Declaration and Programme of Action. As a result, there was a growing interest in looking at the whole of development in terms of a rights-based approach and an increasing tendency to see social development in particular not as a discretionary act of charity but as a right of individuals in society. It had been found that when a rights-based approach was taken, progress was faster. In the case of the rights of the child, for example, much of the early thinking had been based on altruism or charity, but more recently the focus had been on programmatic actions for children in the context of the Convention on the Rights of the Child. In the case of the advancement of women, a rights-based dimension and a programmatic dimension had moved in parallel, and in the Vienna Declaration and Programme of Action, women's rights had been recognized as an integral part of human rights. A rights-based approach had also been taken to disabled persons and to ageing. Efforts were being made to reach a shared agreement on the corpus of human rights and to design programmatic interventions to reinforce those rights. The potential of a rights-based approach was that it could bring those two strands together, and the Committee was in a unique position to tackle the vital issues involved.

Agenda item 100: Social development, including questions relating to the world social situation and to youth, ageing, disabled persons and the family (A/53/3, A/53/63-S/1998/100, A/53/72-S/1998/156, A/53/95-S/1998/311, A/53/97, A/53/294, A/53/350, A/53/356, A/53/378, A/53/416 and A/53/425)

6. **Mr. Langmore** (Director, Division for Social Policy and Development, Department of Economic and Social Affairs) said that the extent of the economic and social damage from recent international financial turbulence was still growing, but it was clear that many tens of millions of people were losing their jobs, being forced into poverty or being excluded from school or health services. It was also clear that the international financial system was flawed and must be changed.

7. As the political heart of the international system, the United Nations had the responsibility of articulating shared international socio-economic goals, priorities and policies. The ultimate goals set by the World Summit for Social Development were the eradication of absolute poverty, the achievement of full employment, and the fostering of secure, stable and just societies. A new strategy was required which

recognized that the constant and complete integration of the social dimension of policy with the economic dimension was needed; that international financial stabilization was imperative for social development; that priority must be given to social programmes, such as basic education and health and social protection; that more countries should consider the establishment or renewal of a national social contract, with clear, consensual aims and comprehensive policies for their achievement; and that in order to encourage private sector growth, Governments must ensure that credit was readily accessible, at manageable interest rates.

8. The principal subject for the Committee's consideration at the current session was preparations for the International Year of Older Persons, which had been launched on 1 October 1998 at United Nations Headquarters. Worldwide preparations for the Year were outlined in the report of the Secretary-General (A/53/294), which included recommendations for the exploration of principles and/or practical strategies towards "a society for all ages", through consultation with national committees for the Year.

9. **Mr. Donokusumo** (Indonesia) said that the global decline in mortality and birth rates was leading to an increased ageing of society. The transition was occurring faster in developing countries, which had weaker social safety nets and safeguards, than in developed countries. One concept which was present in all United Nations initiatives on the issues of youth and ageing was that of individual lifelong development and the implicit recognition that health and well-being in later life were inextricably linked to opportunities and healthy development during the formative years. His delegation welcomed the adoption of the Lisbon Declaration on Youth Policies and Programmes and was committed to implementing it effectively, while anticipating its contribution to a long-term strategy on older persons.

10. There was an urgent need to create employment opportunities for youth, as a central factor in alleviating poverty and marginalization. His delegation was deeply concerned that, despite the goals set at the World Summit for Social Development, approximately 30 per cent of the world's workforce was either unemployed or underemployed. No significant effort had been made to promote full employment in the developing countries, at a beneficial wage rate; in fact, for some developing countries, contractionary policies in pursuit of economic stability had led to a further increase in unemployment. There was a need to promote young people's access to land, credit, technologies and information. The agreed conclusions adopted by the Commission for Social Development had laid out various means of generating employment opportunities for youth and vulnerable groups in society. In order to make progress in meeting the goals and expectations of youth, sound and pragmatic macroeconomic policies must be championed.

11. The implications of the ageing of society for labour policy, health care, patterns of production, consumption, savings and investment, and for the family, and society at large, were considerable and unprecedented. The International Year of Older Persons should increase awareness of the demographic changes that were occurring and of the need to adopt policies that would facilitate the programmes of the future. While activities for the Year would be initiated primarily at the national level, it was to be hoped that there would be tangible results which could be applied in policy-making and programme formulation and in evaluation. That would require support for additional research on the implications of ageing societies, policies that dealt with the dual concepts of active ageing and appropriate caregiving, and the establishment of guidelines to support individual lifelong development. Quality of life was no less important than longevity. The special session of the General Assembly to be held in 1999 could make a valuable contribution to determining long-term strategies on ageing.

12. **Mr. Mahubani** (Singapore) said that, although the future was unpredictable, the number of babies born in the past few decades who would survive and become old people had inevitable demographic consequences. By the year 2150, one third of the world's population would be over the age of 60. In meeting the needs of its ageing population, Singapore followed a set of key principles. The first principle was personal responsibility, namely, that every citizen must assume responsibility for planning for his or her old age. Workers were required to contribute 20 per cent of their income to the Central Provident Fund and that contribution was matched by employers. The money went into a private account and was intended only for individual use; Singapore did not believe that workers should contribute to a common pool, as that diminished the incentive to save. The second principle was that the family, not the State, should take primary responsibility for its aged members. The Chinese saying that "having an old person in the family is like owning a treasure" summed up the traditional Asian attitude towards older persons. Believing that such values, which had served East Asian society well through 4,000 years of history, should be sustained, Singapore had enacted legislation to ensure that the family remained the primary caregiver for older persons. The third principle was that the Government could enhance the ability of individuals to look after themselves in old age. Efforts were being made to extend retirement age and generate appropriate employment opportunities for elderly persons.

At the same time, special incentives, such as tax relief and housing incentives were being given to families to assist them in taking care of their older members.

13. His Government's goals for the International Year of Older Persons were to enhance the public awareness of the challenges and implications of an ageing society, to promote the concept of "productive ageing" and to foster intergenerational ties. It had already formed a committee to study the critical issue of how to balance the competing demands of the young and the old as society aged.

14. The world was moving into uncharted territory. Never before had so many societies had such large proportions of elderly people. The implications were not only political and economic but also psychological and spiritual. Member States would have to pool their experience and draw on the wisdom that came with age to find both the right questions and the right answers.

15. **Ms. Ferdaus** (Bangladesh) said that as the world community looked forward to the year 2000, it should review the goals and objectives set at the World Summit for Social Development in 1995. Social disintegration, endemic poverty, unemployment, crime, drug abuse and an unstable global economy continued to impair social development efforts. The Least Developed Countries (LDCs) were facing grave difficulties, and older persons, the unemployed, women and children were the most seriously affected. To ensure social development for all, a renewed commitment was necessary at both the national and the international level.

16. It was a common perception that older people required higher levels of welfare and were a drain on society. Their ability to contribute to social development through their wisdom, values and knowledge was often overlooked. Her delegation believed that the International Year of Older Persons would help to change negative perceptions about ageing. Her Government welcomed the Secretary-General's report on preparations for the International Year (A/53/294) and agreed that policies were needed which would both strengthen individual lifelong development, focusing on self-help and independence, and create an enabling environment of families, communities and social institutions.

17. Her Government remained committed to the International Plan of Action on Ageing and had made elaborate plans for the commemoration of the International Year. In the coming months, it would approve a national plan for meeting the welfare and health care needs of older persons and would propose a South Asian Regional Plan of Action on Ageing covering the following areas: family integration; public awareness of the welfare needs of older persons; special medical and health care services; poverty alleviation; a social security system for older persons; housing; reading and recreation facilities; reduced transportation fares for older persons; exemption from income tax; and concessional electricity, gas and water rates.

18. Although the world was ageing, there were more young people than ever before. A nurturing environment for young people would not only help them to fulfil their potential but also make the future more secure. Her delegation therefore commended the Government of Portugal for having hosted the World Conference of Ministers Responsible for Youth in August 1998, and supported the measures proposed in the Lisbon Declaration on Youth Policies and Programmes. It also welcomed the recommendations of the Third World Youth Forum of the United Nations System, which were designed to promote youth participation for human development. Social development was the bedrock upon which peace, progress and prosperity were built. Sustained efforts must therefore be made to achieve it.

19. **Mr. Pell** (United States of America) said that ageing was a serious issue which deserved national and international attention. Older persons should enjoy freedom, independence and the free exercise of individual initiative in managing their own lives. They should also be given employment opportunities, protection against abuse, neglect and exploitation, and the opportunity to participate in and contribute to a wide range of meaningful civic, cultural, educational and recreational activities.

20. Member States should work with the United Nations system and non-governmental organizations to promote solidarity among generations and to bring about "a society for all ages". His delegation encouraged Member States to inform and educate the general public about ageing; to recognize the contribution of older persons to society; to engage in scientific research and planning for longevity to meet the individual and social needs of older persons; and to incorporate a gender perspective into preparations for the International Year of Older Persons. Whether sufficient resources existed to care for older persons and how those resources should be managed were also questions which must be addressed.

21. On a more positive note, 77-year-old Senator John Glenn, who had been the first man to orbit the Earth 36 years previously, was about to travel into space again, aboard the Space Shuttle. His flight was highly symbolic and should help to create a positive image of ageing. Moreover, it would contribute to scientific research on the ageing process. The International Year of Older Persons was a fitting occasion to honour older persons around the globe for their many

contributions to their communities and to the world as parents, grandparents, workers, volunteers and role models.

22. Although discussions such as the present one were valuable, they must not be seen as the ultimate goal. Member States must focus on and produce results. They must take the ideas put forward in the United Nations system and adapt them to their own conditions. His Government remained committed to working with the United Nations, other international organizations and non-governmental organizations to create a society which was truly for all ages.

23. **Ms. Nishitateno** (Japan) said that Japan's rapid population ageing was making it difficult for families to take care of their older members. The Government, therefore, was taking systematic, comprehensive measures to provide all the services required by older people. It had enacted legislation covering such areas as work and income, health and welfare, learning, social involvement and the living environment. It was also engaged in various preparations for the International Year of Older Persons, which it hoped would contribute to the realization of a true "society for all ages".

24. Today's young people would be instrumental in achieving that goal. It was therefore increasingly important to devote greater attention to youth-related issues. In that connection, the recent first World Conference of Ministers Responsible for Youth had been a timely and significant event. International cooperation was essential for making inroads against the problems confronting contemporary youth, especially drug abuse and organized crime. The active participation of young people in all fields of endeavour, and especially in solving their own problems, was also essential, as was mutual understanding and friendship among young people of different countries, to which end Japan was active in promoting international youth exchange programmes.

25. Awareness of the issue of disabled persons had been enhanced in Japan by the United Nations Decade of Disabled Persons and by the Asian and Pacific Decade of Disabled Persons, which was due to end in 2002. Japan had launched its own action plan for persons with disabilities in 1995 and was a contributor to the United Nations Voluntary Fund on Disability. It would also continue to support the international mine-clearance and victim assistance effort.

26. Lastly, Member States must continue their efforts to prepare for the overall review and appraisal of the implementation of the outcome of the 1995 World Summit for Social Development. She expressed gratitude to the Government of Switzerland for its generous offer to host the special session to be devoted to that review in the year 2000.

27. **Mr. Reyes Rodriguez** (Cuba) said that his Government was particularly interested in the welfare of young people, older persons, disabled persons and families. A social development programme which did not include affirmative action strategies and policies for those population groups was inconceivable. Indeed, one of Cuba's fundamental achievements of the past three decades had been to guarantee social equity and equal opportunities for all members of society. Cuba had been working to implement the World Programme of Action for Youth to the Year 2000 and Beyond, both nationally and internationally, and welcomed the results of the recent World Conference of Ministers Responsible for Youth. His delegation hoped that the commitments made at the Conference would be endorsed by the General Assembly and incorporated as guidelines for policy-making on youth empowerment.

28. Cuba welcomed the proclamation of the International Year of Older Persons and pledged to contribute to its success. In that connection, an event entitled GERONTOVIDA 99 was to be held in Havana from 27 September to 1 October 1999 and would include both the third Latin American Congress of the International Association of Gerontology and the second Ibero-American Meeting of Older Adults. Cuba's policies with regard to older persons involved both the creation of opportunities for their active participation in society and the provision of assistance to those who needed it. Older persons were guaranteed universal medical and hospital coverage and social security benefits. Cuba also supported associations of disabled persons and implemented programmes for such persons in the areas of health, education, employment, artistic and cultural activities and sports.

29. His delegation reiterated its proposal for the drafting of an international bill of human rights for the new millennium which would emphasize the promotion and protection of the rights of the main social groups requiring special attention. Despite economic hardships exacerbated by the illegal economic, commercial and financial blockade imposed by the United States of America, Cuba's Government continued to devote a significant and growing proportion of its budget to social protection programmes. In 1997, 35.03 per cent of the total budget had been allocated to social security, public health and education. That contrasted with the trend in most developing countries, where social spending had declined as a result of the application of neo-liberal policies, the reduction in States' economic capacity and resource availability, and the rapid decrease in official development assistance (ODA). Cuba's people would never abandon the essential humanism that had guided its social agenda for the past three decades.

30. **Ms. Castro de Barish** (Costa Rica), speaking on behalf of the Central American States, welcomed the statement made by the Under-Secretary-General to the human dimension for Economic and Social Affairs. As indicated in the Secretary-General's report (A/53/294), the observance of the International Year of Older Persons was based on the concepts and strategies emanating from the World Conference on Ageing, held in Vienna in 1982. The Division for Social Policy and Development had made substantial headway since then in promoting those concepts and strategies, in cooperation with Governments, United Nations agencies and members of civil society. The fact that the launching of the International Year of Older Persons had coincided with the fiftieth anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights was a timely reminder that older persons had human rights too.

31. The action taken by the Central American countries with regard to older persons was based on the policies pursued by the Regional Social Commission and the Central American Integration System. In preparation for the International Year, her own country had established a national committee to coordinate events and activities. A plan of action for older persons was also being developed. However, there were already many health and social services available to older persons in Costa Rica. Echoing the theme "A society for all ages", young people receiving Government scholarships were expected to work with the elderly. The aim was to teach young people how to relate to older persons, for the benefit of both groups.

32. The Government of El Salvador saw the International Year as an opportunity to help young people learn more about the valuable role of older persons. Activities to mark the year included publicizing the United Nations Principles for Older Persons, the human rights of older persons under the Family Code and the International Plan of Action on Ageing. Commemorative postage stamps were to be issued in 1999. Older persons would also be encouraged to take part in voluntary activities.

33. The Government of Nicaragua was conducting an exhaustive analysis of the progress made in meeting the needs of older persons in that country. Such persons enjoyed comprehensive medical care, were exempt from taxes on property and unearned income, paid reduced rates for water and telephone service and received pensions and family allowances. Cultural, recreational and other programmes were helping older persons to make the transition to an active and healthy later life.

34. The Central American countries saw the International Year of Older Persons as a starting point for launching a long-term policy for the new millennium which recognized the potential and contributions of older persons.

35. **Mr. Al-Sudairy** (Saudi Arabia) said that social development and the well-being and dignity of all citizens, in accordance with the principles of Islamic law, were among the primary concerns of his country's Government. All persons were encouraged and helped to overcome any physical, psychological, mental, social or economic difficulties which they might face in becoming full and productive participants in the life of society. Appropriate institutions provided vocational and professional training, families were encouraged to provide care for children in need, services for disabled persons were available, and financial, technical and administrative assistance was provided where required. Voluntary organizations and the private sector were major factors in that connection, working alongside official government agencies. There too, the Islamic religion encouraged private benevolence and social solidarity, and the Government sought to foster such actions by providing subsidies. Disabled children, in particular, had benefited and continued to benefit from both governmental and private assistance. Indeed, disabled persons of all ages were provided with vocational and other training, enabling them to become productive members of society. Both private sector enterprises and government agencies were given incentives to employ such persons, to the benefit of all concerned.

36. Social development in Saudi Arabia had proceeded in accordance with the Declaration and Programme of Action adopted at the World Summit for Social Development, held in Copenhagen in 1995. There had been substantial accomplishments in all areas of social development, while Islamic religious and moral values had been respected. The main objective was to help all citizens assume their responsibility of becoming integrated, productive members of society, in a context of all-round development providing dignity and an adequate level of well-being for all.

37. **Ms. Li Sangu** (China) said that the International Year of Older Persons would play a key role in drawing attention to the issues of ageing and the need to provide services for older persons, both of which would create significant social, economic and cultural problems in the twenty-first century and would also have an impact on global peace and development. In the case of China, a developing country with an underdeveloped economy, the current rapid increase in the older population would pose a serious challenge. Her Government therefore attached great importance to its activities in the field of ageing and had achieved remarkable results. For instance, it had established a system-wide network of institutions working in that field, as well as a

social security system in which the State, society, the family and the individual all endeavoured to promote the welfare of older persons. In that context, the special needs of older persons were gradually being met and their quality of life was improving constantly. Government policies and guidelines on ageing were also publicized regularly, helping to raise public awareness of ageing and of the need to respect and care for older persons.

38. Numerous celebrations and preparatory activities would be launched in connection with the International Year of Older Persons. China had that day signed the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights and stood ready to increase its exchanges and cooperation with the international community and the United Nations system in the field of ageing with a view to establishing "a society for all ages".

39. **Ms. Alvarez** (Dominican Republic) said that her country had taken a number of steps to promote and observe the International Year of Older Persons. It was, however, important to realize that the Year was not an end in itself, but must serve to focus continuing attention on older persons. In that connection, the Secretary-General's report on preparations for the International Year (A/53/294) reflected society's changing attitude towards older persons. It was no longer just a question of what society could do for older persons, but of what they could contribute to society. The Year could thus be the beginning of steady progress towards "a society for all ages".

40. In most developing countries, the traditional family-based support system for older persons was being undermined by urbanization, industrialization and migration. In planning for worldwide population ageing, it was essential to take that situation into account. If a demographic catastrophe was to be averted, older persons must be brought into the mainstream and included in policies and programmes across the board. The task was a daunting one, but it could not be avoided. The power and influence of the media could be used to eliminate stereotypes and create a new image of older persons that was more in keeping with contemporary realities. The International Year could serve as a starting point for the necessary change in perceptions that must precede policy-making, by casting ageing in a far more positive light.

41. **Ms. Al-Awadhi** (Kuwait) said that the provision of care for disabled persons was an essential part of the social security system in Kuwait and extended beyond financial support to include rehabilitation, health, education and sport. International support was also received in the form of information exchanges and means of improving the welfare of disabled persons. In that connection, the recent enactment of legislation covering a wide range of disability-related issues was an important achievement, signalling the State's growing attention to that area.

42. Her Government was endeavouring to alleviate the severe impact of the Iraqi occupation, which had led to an increase in the number of disabled persons. In particular, a tremendous number of people had been disabled by the explosion of landmines planted throughout Kuwaiti territory by the Iraqi forces. It was also implementing policies and measures aimed at protecting disabled persons from the psychological and social effects of disability and at enhancing their enjoyment of all rights, with a view to eliminating the obstacles to their full social integration. In that connection, her Government was guided by the statement on the various needs of disabled persons contained in the programmes and platforms for action of the World Conference on Human Rights, the International Conference on Population and Development, the World Summit for Social Development, and the Fourth World Conference on Women. It also took into account the proposals contained in the Long-term Strategy to Implement the World Programme of Action concerning Disabled Persons to the Year 2000 and Beyond.

43. **Ms. Sibal** (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO)) said that the concern at the social exclusion of older persons which had led to the launching of the International Year was directly relevant to the mandate of the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), whose commitment to the empowerment of older generations had become intertwined with a new approach to education that went far beyond simply providing literacy courses and education for all throughout life. Men and women were now being asked how they thought they could improve their own lives. Opportunities for economic self-sufficiency should be available to everyone. The International Year offered an opportunity to discuss what was meant by "a society for all ages".

44. UNESCO had just entered into a Memorandum of Understanding with the American Association of Retired Persons (AARP), the largest organization in the world dedicated to the issues of an ageing society, which focused on adult learning and the role of older volunteers in promoting a culture of peace.

45. Turning to the current state of basic education, which was relevant to all the items under discussion, she said that increased investment in education had recently been recognized as one of the priorities for meeting the challenge of globalization. Since international loans for providing

education were undesirable, education for all must be financed by a reshaping of countries' priorities. She hoped that the recent initiative adopted by African ministers of education, aimed at finding local solutions to educational problems, would inspire other education ministers around the world.

46. She welcomed United Nations efforts to coordinate youth policies. UNESCO had recently coordinated an international campaign in which young people would mobilize their peers for a twenty-first century free of drugs. A youth charter, based on contributions from young people the world over, had been drafted as the main instrument of the international campaign. In the context of making education a tool for youth empowerment and eliciting the views of young people on educational reform, UNESCO was organizing several major events and had participated actively in the Third World Youth Forum of the United Nations System. It had also been involved in the first World Conference of Ministers Responsible for Youth, held in Lisbon in August 1998, which had adopted the Lisbon Declaration on Youth Policies and Programmes, to which UNESCO had made an important contribution, particularly under the segments on education and peace, and had called for active youth participation during the celebration of the International Year for the Culture of Peace. It was through such activities that UNESCO was seeking to conceptualize social development and to develop and implement policies and action strategies.

The meeting rose at 5.35 p.m.